

## News

# Public uses camera phones to help police fight crime

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LIVERMORE — A passerby happened upon a man attempting to kidnap his estranged girlfriend on a downtown street corner. He pulled out his cell phone and called police.

Then he used his phone in another way.

“A passerby ... used a cell phone camera to shoot (the kidnapper) dragging her down, as well as the license plate number” of the car in which he drove away, said Livermore police Lt. Scott Trudeau.

Police, after seeing the video, broadcast the license plate number to other agencies, and several hours later Francisco Zuniga was arrested in Milpitas.

That was the only recent event of witness-supplied video assisting in a police investigation that Trudeau can recall, but with millions of camera-equipped cell phones on the streets, there are just as many potential “detectives” available to help police on any number of crimes.

A few law enforcement agencies around the country have realized this and have started programs that make it easier for the public to submit videos, as well as post videos online to catch suspects.

Others believe that submitted videos raise credibility concerns.

“It’s not something we’ve looked into,” Pleasanton police Sgt. Jim Knox said.

Knox said that if a case called for it and video was available, police would investigate it. However, the department is not ready to institute a formal program where the public could submit their photos and videos.

“Like any digital media, you have to look into the credibility, and what (the witness’) motive is,” he said.

Knox said people who hold grudges against others would not be reliable information-gatherers in cases involving those people.

One California agency that does have a formal program is the Pismo Beach Police Department.

“So many of these cell phones have these capabilities, but so few people are using them to give police crime tips or just to report (dangerous conditions) such as sink holes,” Pismo Beach police Chief Joe Cortez said. “We wanted to get more timely crime tip info.”

The department launched “E-Tip” in May. People can e-mail video clips and photos to an e-mail address that is checked regularly by emergency dispatchers.

One of the first tips was from a resident who thought that teens were skateboarding recklessly on the tipster’s street.

“I was concerned we’d get some prank e-mails, but it hasn’t happened,” Cortez said.

The program is useful for tracking hit-and-run suspects and during fights that are broken up before police can respond, he said.

Jimmy Lee, spokesman for the Contra Costa County Sheriff’s Department, said there are two sides to the issue.

“Law enforcement agencies would welcome that,” Lee said in an e-mail, “although there may be questions about the authenticity of the images and tape and the credibility of the person who filmed it.

“There needs to be some follow up. But at a minimum, it could give an agency new leads and avenues to explore.”

Cortez said credibility was a concern when E-Tip was in the planning stages.

“But that same concern comes up when someone picks up the phone and calls 9-1-1,” he said.

It can’t hurt, he said, and police can at least investigate the incident to see if a crime happened.

The 9-1-1 system “was great when it first came out,” Cortez said. “We’re just taking the next step.”

A few law enforcement agencies across the country are trying a slightly different tactic. Rather than asking the public to turn in videos of crimes in progress, they are putting videos of crimes online on the popular video sharing Web site YouTube and asking the public to identify who is in the video and where they are.

The videos, usually surveillance footage, are being posted by sheriff’s departments in Knox County in Tennessee and Florida’s Broward and Polk counties.

Knox County Sheriff’s Communication’s Specialist Drew Reeves, who came up with the idea to try the program at his department, said it has been successful so far for three reasons: It allowed the department to more quickly disseminate videos of crimes to the media, allow a large number of people to view the videos without using the department’s Web site bandwidth and has led to a couple of arrests already.

“We put up some video for a purse-snatcher suspect and we had him in custody the next day,” Reeves said.

He said the videos don’t replace the work of officers, but gives them more to work with.

“It’s kind of like an uncharted territory,” he said. “It’s like having our own video channel.”

Trudeau said Livermore police will probably research the options of soliciting video and photos in the future.

“You have to look for a way to manage it,” Trudeau said.

For now, the old-fashioned way of reporting crimes and suspicious behavior will have to do — call it in.

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